

## THE ATTRIBUTOR'S UNPROMPTED USE OF STRENGTH AND DIRECTION OF CONSENSUS INFORMATION

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The attributor's unprompted use of consensus information in judging behavior was studied. By examining the context, attributors were able to estimate the degree of consensus to expect for the actor's behavior. Participants read vignettes that described real-life situations and imagined themselves or an acquaintance performing a socially desirable or undesirable action in the situation. The vignettes varied according to expected direction of consensus (a majority would be expected to act in desirable or undesirable manner) and expected strength of consensus (strong, moderate, or weak majority). Higher situational attributions were found when the actor's behavior was congruent with, rather than in contrast to, the expected consensus, particularly when the behavior was undesirable. Furthermore, higher situational attributions were evoked by expected majority performance of undesirable acts than desirable acts. Attributors did not distinguish among strengths of consensus; nor was there differential attention to consensus for self-versus other-attributions.

*Keywords:* judging behavior, use of strength and direction of consensus information.

Kelley (1967) proposed that the tendency to attribute behavior to an actor's character or disposition should be greater when few people, in contrast to a large majority, would be expected to perform the behavior. Despite the findings of some researchers that consensus information does not affect attributions (cf. Borgida, 1978), others have confirmed Kelley's hypothesis by identifying the conditions under which consensus information will be used (Feldman et al., 1976; Hansen & Donoghue, 1977; Hansen & Lowe, 1976; Wells & Harvey, 1977, 1978).

One problem with most of these studies, however, is that the researchers failed to test directly whether consensus information is used in everyday situations to judge the causes of behavior. Participants were exposed to unique laboratory situations that they are unlikely to encounter in their everyday lives (e.g., Nisbett & Borgida, 1975). More importantly, consensus information was given to the participants either subtly (e.g., Hansen & Donoghue, 1977) or, in most cases, overtly (e.g., Feldman et al., 1976). Although common situations exist where consensus information is readily available (e.g., grade lists, election results), for most behaviors that individuals engage in or observe, "hard evidence" on exactly where the actor stands in comparison with others is

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unavailable. In these situations the attributor must search the context for cues to how most people would act, or rely on experience in similar circumstances. This self-based judgment of the consensus may then be used to understand the actor's behavior.

In the present study the use of consensus information was examined when the attributor was not given the information directly, but was able to derive it from knowledge of the situation. Participants read vignettes that described real-life situations and imagined themselves, a liked acquaintance, or a disliked acquaintance performing a socially desirable or undesirable action in the situation. The vignettes varied along two dimensions of consensus information: expected strength of consensus (almost all, a large majority, or a little more than half of the actors would behave alike) and expected direction of consensus (the majority would behave in a socially desirable or an undesirable manner). It was predicted that when the actor's behavior was congruent with, rather than contrary to, the expected majority behavior, the behavior would be attributed less to the actor's personal characteristics and more to the situation. Furthermore, this effect was particularly likely when strong consensus was expected – in other words, when clear-cut norms exist.

It was also predicted that expectations that the majority would act in an undesirable manner would affect attributions more than expectations that the majority would act in a desirable manner. Because laws and moral codes generally guide behavior in praiseworthy directions, normative undesirable behaviors presumably are less common. Thus, if a situation arises in which most individuals would act in a blameworthy manner, consensus cues may be quite salient to the attributor. In contrast, because praiseworthy behavior is expected, the fact that most people would behave in a praiseworthy fashion may have less impact upon the attribution process.

Also examined was the differential use of consensus information to explain one's own or others' behaviors. While there is some evidence that actors do not use information about consensus to judge their own behaviors (Hansen & Lowe, 1976; Hansen & Donoghue, 1977), researchers have found, in general, that attribution processes tend to vary along affective, rather than self-other, dimensions (cf. Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976). Attributions about the behavior of a liked acquaintance typically resemble self-attributions, while both differ from attributions about the behavior of a disliked acquaintance.

## METHOD

Vignettes were rationally generated by the author to reflect academic and social situations familiar to college students. An example follows:

"A friend asks to borrow \$40 for something. He has borrowed small amounts of money in the past and has never paid you back. He tells you what the loan is for and it turns out to be for something very important. You can decide to make a loan to him or to refuse the loan."

Pilot participants ( $n = 37$ ) read the tentative vignettes and answered questions about each one. First, participants estimated the percentage of people who would choose each of the behavioral options. The two percentages were required to total 100%. Next, the participants rated (on a 7-point scale, ranging from *very undesirable* to *very desirable*) the extent to which each option was a "good or desirable thing to do". Responses to these questions were used to determine the strength and direction of the

consensus to expect in the situation. If pilot participants indicated that a majority was expected to perform the undesirable behavior, the vignette was labeled “undesirable” direction; if a majority was expected to perform the desirable behavior, the vignette was labeled “desirable” direction. Vignettes were labeled as presenting strong, moderate, or weak consensus depending upon the specific percentage that was expected to perform the majority behavior.

Two final questions ensured that credible vignettes were selected. Pilot participants rated the difficulty (on a 7-point scale, ranging from *very difficult* to *very easy*) of picturing themselves and a friend in the situation. On the basis of the pilot responses,

12 vignettes were selected that met the following criteria: (1) Four vignettes represented each of three strengths of consensus. The mean percentages of individuals who were expected to perform the majority behavior were 81, 66, and 54 for strong, moderate, and weak consensus vignettes, respectively. The vignettes within a consensus strength level differed significantly from vignettes in the other two levels in terms of percentage of normative responding, but vignettes within a strength level did not differ significantly from each other. (2) In 2 of the 4 vignettes within each strength level the majority was expected to perform in a desirable direction; in the remaining two the majority was expected to perform in an undesirable direction. (3) T tests confirmed that the behavioral options presented in each vignette differed significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) from one another in terms of social desirability. (4) Furthermore, the vignettes reflected credible, realistic situations. Pilot participants indicated that it was not difficult to imagine themselves ( $M = 5.22$ ) or a friend ( $M = 4.88$ ) in the situation. No vignette received an ease rating of less than 4.14 on the 7-point scale.

The final 12 vignettes thus comprised two vignettes for each combination of consensus strength and direction. For the experimental session 1 of the 2 vignettes within each combination was selected to end with the actor performing the socially desirable option, and the other with the actor performing the undesirable option (thus, in one vignette the actor’s behavior was congruent with the consensus; in the other, the behavior contrasted with the consensus). Which of the two vignettes was chosen for the desirable outcome was randomly determined for each participant.

#### EXPERIMENTAL SESSION

Male ( $n = 61$ ) and female ( $n = 67$ ) students, randomly selected from a departmental participant pool, participated in small groups. The sessions were conducted by a male undergraduate. Students were given written instructions and an attribution packet. The instructions stated that the participants should select two same-sex college student acquaintances, one liked and one disliked, whom they knew fairly well. The attribution packet included 36 vignettes, 12 apiece for each of three target persons: themselves, a liked acquaintance, and a disliked acquaintance. The participant was asked to imagine the target performing the specified behavior in the presented situation. The vignettes for each target, which were presented in a set, were identical to those for other targets except for target labels and related grammatical changes. There were two random orderings of vignettes within sets, and the order of the self, liked, and disliked acquaintance sets varied randomly across participants.

Each participant was asked to rate (on a scale ranging from 0 to 8) the importance of the following two factors in determining the target’s behavior: (a) personal characteristics

(personality traits and characteristics, dispositions, attitudes, the way the target is), and (b) characteristics of the situation (the particular situation or surrounding environment, the other people involved and what they are doing, situational constraints that the target was under).

## RESULTS

While personal and situational attributions were inversely related (the median  $r$  across the 36 vignettes was  $-0.28$  and ranged from  $-0.07$  to  $-0.58$ ), the amount of variance accounted for by the relationship was small. Therefore, situational and personal attributions were examined separately. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to test the effects of target (self, liked, and disliked acquaintances), strength of consensus (strong, moderate, weak), direction of consensus (desirable, undesirable), social desirability of the target's behavior (desirable, undesirable), and sex of participant on personal and situational attributions.<sup>1</sup> The first set of analyses to be discussed was performed on situational attribution.

### SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS

**Consensus** It was predicted that an individual's behavior is more likely to be attributed to the situation when the behavior is congruent with the expected majority behavior than when it contrasts with the expected majority behavior. This hypothesis was partially confirmed (social desirability by direction interaction),  $F(1, 106) = 28.44, p < 0.001$ . As predicted, congruent undesirable behavior was ascribed more to the situation ( $M = 5.82$ ) than contrary undesirable behavior ( $M = 4.91$ ). However, there was little difference between congruent and contrary desirable behaviors ( $M = 4.93$  and  $5.02$ , respectively).

It was further hypothesized that the predicted difference between attributions of congruent and contrary behaviors would be most likely under strong consensus where clear-cut norms exist for majority behavior than under moderate or weak consensus where norms are more ambiguous. An interaction among consensus strength, consensus direction and social desirability tended to confirm this hypothesis,  $F(1, 212) = 12.49, p < 0.01$  (see Table 1). Under strong consensus both desirable and undesirable congruent behaviors were attributed more to the situation than their respective contrary behaviors. This trend continued under moderate and weak consensus for undesirable behaviors. Contrary to prediction, however, desirable behaviors were less likely to be attributed to the situation when consensus was congruent than when it was contrary under moderate and weak consensus.

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<sup>1</sup>Because the design involved repeated measures, the Greenhouse-Geiser correction was applied (Myers, 1972). The numerator degrees of freedom were reduced to "1" in tests of repeated measures, and the resulting probability levels thus may be conservative. Furthermore, another between-subjects factor was included in the design. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 orientation conditions. Before making attributions participants were asked to list the situational factors that affected the target's behavior, to list the personal factors, to list both, or were not requested to make a list. Although two significant effects involved orientation, none of these effects interfered with the interpretation of the presented findings. Therefore, for ease of presentation, it was decided to treat this factor minimally.

TABLE 1

MEAN SITUATIONAL ATTRIBUTIONS FOR DESIRABLE AND UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS PERFORMED UNDER VARYING STRENGTHS AND DIRECTIONS OF CONSENSUS

| Behavior<br>Consensus | Desirable | Undesirable |
|-----------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Weak desirable        | 4.91      | 4.79        |
| Weak undesirable      | 5.28      | 5.99        |
| Moderate desirable    | 4.46      | 5.26        |
| Moderate undesirable  | 4.75      | 5.54        |
| Strong desirable      | 5.41      | 4.69        |
| Strong undesirable    | 5.03      | 5.93        |

It thus appears that a weak consensus was sufficient for individuals to incorporate consensus direction information into their judgments of blameworthy behavior, but strong consensus was necessary for individuals to incorporate in the predicted manner the same information into judgments of praiseworthy behavior. The consensus direction and social desirability main effects may explain this phenomenon. It was predicted that differential attention might be paid to consensus data when it is believed that the majority would perform an undesirable act than a desirable act. As predicted, undesirable consensus occasioned a higher situational rating ( $M = 5.42$ ) than desirable consensus ( $M = 4.92$ ),  $F(1, 106) = 49.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . In addition, undesirable behavior was more likely to be attributed to the situation ( $M = 5.37$ ) than desirable behavior ( $M = 4.97$ ),  $F(1, 106) = 21.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Thus it is not surprising that, across all levels of consensus, undesirable behavior in undesirable consensus situations was attributed more to the situation than was behavior in the other three consensus direction by social desirability cells. Furthermore, since the situation was seen as less responsible for desirable behavior and desirable consensus was less salient, situational attributions for congruent desirable behaviors tended to be low. Only when it was evident that almost all individuals would behave in a desirable manner was consensus information used to judge the target's desirable behavior.

The above results suggest that individuals attended to the expected strength of consensus, at least when desirable behaviors were performed. For the consensus hypothesis to be confirmed optimally, however, differential attributions for the same behavior in congruent versus contrasting consensus situations should increase with increasing strength of consensus. In other words, as strength of consensus increases the attributor should be more certain that the situation did or did not contribute to the target's behavior. As Table 1 demonstrates, this result did not occur. Therefore, while consensus direction appears to be a potent source of information to attributors (at least when undesirable acts are performed), the strength of the consensus within a consensus direction does not appear to affect attributions.

**Variations by target** It was predicted that the undesirable behavior of a disliked acquaintance would be attributed less to the situation than would his/her desirable behavior, while the reverse would be true for the behavior of oneself and a liked acquaintance. An interaction between target and social desirability tended to confirm the prediction,  $F(1, 212) = 8.83$ ,  $p < 0.01$  (see left side of Table 2). While attributions for a disliked acquaintance did not vary by social desirability of the action, attributions for self

and a liked acquaintance were more situational when the behavior performed was undesirable.

**TABLE 2**  
**MEAN ATTRIBUTION RATINGS BY TARGET AND SOCIAL DESIRABILITY OF THE TARGET'S BEHAVIOR**

| Target                | Attribution                          |  |                                   |                                     |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                       | Situational<br>Desirable<br>Behavior | Situational<br>Undesirable<br>Behavior | Personal<br>Desirable<br>Behavior | Personal<br>Undesirable<br>Behavior |
| Self                  | 5.05                                 | 5.60                                   | 6.27                              | 5.20                                |
| Liked acquaintance    | 4.93                                 | 5.58                                   | 6.40                              | 5.13                                |
| Disliked acquaintance | 4.94                                 | 4.92                                   | 5.70                              | 6.02                                |

It was further suggested that the use of consensus information may vary by target. Although a three-way interaction among target, social desirability, and strength of consensus was found,  $F(1, 424) = 4.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , no systematic differences were evident. The interaction was due to reversal of the predicted effect for attributions of a disliked acquaintance's behavior: under moderate consensus desirable behavior was attributed less to the situation than undesirable behavior. No other interactions between target and consensus information were significant. Therefore, no systematic support for differential use of consensus information by target was found.

#### PERSONAL ATTRIBUTION

In contrast to situational attributions, personal attributions were relatively unaffected by experimental condition. A main effect for social desirability,  $F(1, 106) = 52.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , and an interaction between target and social desirability,  $F(1, 212) = 41.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , produced the predicted result (see right side of Table 2): undesirable behavior of a disliked acquaintance was attributed more to personal factors than was his/her desirable behavior, while the reverse was true for the behavior of oneself and the liked acquaintance. In addition, males were more likely to alter their personal attributions as a function of consensus direction than were females, but only when undesirable behavior was performed (sex of participant by consensus direction,  $F(1, 106) = 5.00$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; sex of participant by consensus direction by social desirability,  $F(1, 106) = 5.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

#### ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

A possible criticism of the present study is that, because the behavior occurred within a naturalistic context, factors other than consensus strength and direction may have affected the attributions. However, recall that two vignettes were selected for each consensus strength by direction combination. One of the vignettes presented the target behaving in a desirable manner, while the other presented undesirable behavior, and which vignette solutions were chosen varied randomly across participants. To the extent that the results do not vary across the two vignettes, confidence in the generalizability of the results may increase. Accordingly, the above ANOVAs were repeated with vignette added as a covariate. No differences emerged when the covariate was included or deleted from the analysis. Thus the results cited above generalized across the vignettes in each consensus strength by direction cell.

## DISCUSSION

The present study differed from previous investigations of the use of consensus information in two crucial respects. First, consensus information was not provided overtly to the attributors. Instead, the contextual details surrounding the target behavior were described and each participant had the option of utilizing the details to estimate consensus if s/he so wished. This modification over previous research is important for two reasons. When we are called upon to explain an action it is rare that we possess normative data on its frequency. Instead, normative information must be estimated from knowledge of the situation in which the behavior took place and from seeing this and similar actions performed in the past. Thus, the present method of providing consensus information represents how the information is derived in most real-life circumstances. Additionally, Borgida (1978) suggests that demand characteristics may account for previous findings that individuals base explanations upon consensus. This observation is appropriate: almost without exception previous researchers have gone to great lengths to ensure that consensus data are highly visible and are remembered by the participants as they make attributions. The contextual method of presenting consensus data avoids the difficulties of demand characteristics.

A second way in which the present study differs from others is that it is a more complete test of the consensus hypothesis. While in previous studies attributors judged either neutral (e.g., Feldman et al., 1976) or quite undesirable behaviors (e.g., Nisbett and Borgida, 1975), in the present study the use of consensus information was compared to judge desirable and undesirable behaviors. Additionally, while previous studies presented two or, in one case, three "levels" of consensus, the present study included six levels that ranged from strong consensus in support of the target's behavior through weaker levels of consensus to strong consensus in opposition to the target's behavior. Although previous researchers claimed to test the effect of strength of consensus, they in fact tested the effect of consensus direction – the impact of having a majority agree or disagree with the target. In the present study, strength varied in addition to direction, permitting an evaluation of whether attributors discriminated between strong and weak consensus situations, as well as between consensus in support of the act or against it. Discriminating among consensus strengths obviously requires finer judgments than between consensus directions.

The results demonstrate that consensus direction had a decisive impact upon attributions, particularly when undesirable acts were performed by the target. Attributions were more situational when a majority was expected to behave in the same way as the target than when the target's action was regarded as more unique. This result occurred across all levels of strength of consensus for undesirable behavior, but only under strong consensus for desirable behavior. Thus the present results replicate earlier investigations that showed the congruency/contrast effect when undesirable behaviors were judged. These results suggest, however, that the effect may not extend to desirable acts, except perhaps when strong consensus supports or opposes the act.

It was further predicted that the impact of consensus information would vary depending upon the social desirability of the majority behavior. As predicted,

individuals blamed the situation more when a majority was expected to act in an undesirable way than they credited the situation for a majority's expected desirable action. Several factors may account for this finding. First, undesirable behaviors are presumed to be less common. Therefore, when a large number of people are expected to act in a blameworthy way, this fact may be salient to an observer. In contrast, desirable behaviors are presumed to be common and expected. Thus, a large group of people who are expected to behave meritoriously may fail to capture the observer's attention. Secondly, perhaps most individuals believe in the goodness of human nature. We consider a wrongdoer a "bad seed" or a "rotten apple", not expecting one person's character to be representative of the group as a whole. Accordingly, when a situation arises in which a majority is expected to engage in blameworthy acts, we look towards the situation for an explanation rather than to the persons themselves. Thirdly, this attributional strategy is self-protective, permitting the individual to take credit for good actions and to externalize bad ones (cf. Jones & Berglas, 1978).

Although much evidence exists in this and previous investigations that consensus direction information is utilized by attributors, differentiation among finer gradations of consensus appears to be lacking. Attention to the strength of consensus would require that, as the expected majority increases, behavior that conforms to the consensus would be more highly attributed to the situation, and behavior that is contrary to the consensus would be more highly attributed to the person. Because this prediction was disconfirmed for both desirable and undesirable behaviors, there is no direct evidence that individuals differentiate among consensus strengths.

One reason why the participants may not have utilized consensus information fully is suggested by Feldman et al. (1976) and Hansen and Donoghue (1977). They found that if individuals interacted with the experimental stimuli they replaced consensus information supplied by the experimenter with their own self-based judgments. Because the present design required self-based consensus judgments, the possibility exists that judgments of the experimental participants (who were more intimately involved with the stories) differed from the consensus judgments provided by the pilot participants. This possibility cannot be disproved; we were prohibited from asking the experimental participants for their consensus impressions as a manipulation check because the intent of this investigation was to study the naturalistic use of consensus. However, given that participants attended to consensus direction as predicted, a more likely possibility is that it is difficult to make fine distinctions involving consensus strength. Thus, while attributors may ask themselves "What would most people do in this situation?", they probably do not ask themselves "Exactly how many people would do it?"

Self-based judgments, however, may explain why consensus information was used equivalently for self and liked and disliked acquaintances. As noted, experimenter-provided consensus information is most useful when the attributor lacks direct information about the context or target person. Since actors know their history and current feelings, whereas observers generally lack such information, actors and observers may have a differential need for consensus information. In the present study, however, where the targets were well known, the attributors had no such differential need. Accordingly, when the participants attended to consensus information, there was no difference in attention as a function of the target of the attribution.

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